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TAGS: [ETRD](#) [ETTC](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [UNDP](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG MESSAGING ON SANCTIONS RENEWAL AND FOREIGN
FIGHTERS ARTICLE

Classified By: Pol/Econ Counselor Tim Pounds for reasons 1.4(b,d)

Summary

11. (C) The Syrian government's spin machine is in high gear following the May 7 renewal of E.O. 13338 and the May 11 Washington Post article describing a Syria-based foreign fighter pipeline. On E.O. 13338, Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Miqdad told a visiting UN Special Envoy to Iraq that the SARG had not publicly reacted to the story in recognition of the renewal's routine nature. This message was echoed in a May 11 op-ed by a pro-regime analyst entitled, "Sanctions Renewed But Syria Understands." When the UN Special Envoy suggested the SARG could do more to help improve Iraq's security situation by cracking down on foreign fighters, the Syrian diplomat blamed the U.S. and Iraqi governments for not providing actionable intelligence. In response to the Washington Post's detailed account of the foreign fighter pipeline in Syria, "informed Syrian sources" told al-Watan, Syria's only privately-owned daily, that the article had been planted by the "Israeli lobby" in an effort to sabotage the improving U.S.-Syrian relationship. End summary.

SARG Emphasizing Routine Nature of Sanctions Renewal

12. (C) UNDP Resident Representative Ismail Ould Sheikh Ahmed provided the Charge with a readout of UN Special Envoy to Iraq Stefan di Mistura's May 12 meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad in Damascus. When di Mistura asked for Syria's reaction to U.S. sanctions being renewed for another year, Miqdad answered that the SARG had made a conscience decision not to make a public statement as a way of signaling SARG recognition of the renewal's routine nature. The SARG also delivered this message through regime mouthpiece Sami Moubayed's May 11 editorial, "Sanctions Renewed but Syria Understands." In a piece riddled with inaccuracies, Moubayed wrote that the Syrian regime had anticipated the sanctions would be renewed and assumed the Obama Administration would gradually reduce them over time as bilateral relations improved.

MFA Blames FF on Lack of Actionable Intelligence

13. (C) According to Ahmed, Vice FM Miqdad revealed to di Mistura that Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki would soon be visiting Damascus for talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Di Mistura agreed that this was a positive gesture, but suggested the SARG could do more to help improve Iraq's security situation -- particularly in light of the recent uptick in violence. Miqdad pointed out that the Syrian Ambassador to Baghdad was from a Deir Ezzor tribe with family in both eastern Syrian and western Iraq, so he had a personal stake in helping the GOI prevent foreign suicide bombers from killing Iraqis. Shifting the blame back on the U.S., Miqdad complained that the SARG would be willing to act if only the U.S. and GOI would provide names and locations of foreign fighters before they carried out their deadly missions. Unfortunately, Miqdad postured, Syria only learned about foreign fighters after the fact.

SARG attributes WaPo article to an Israeli conspiracy

14. (U) SARG messaging on foreign fighters continued in a May 13 article in the privately-owned, pro-government daily al-Watan. In response to the May 11 Washington Post article, "Terrorist Traffic Via Syria Again Inching Up," so-called "informed Syrian sources" characterized the article's allegation of increased foreign fighter activity through Syria as "unfounded." The article further blamed the Israeli lobby for planting the article in an effort to sabotage Washington's improving relations with Damascus. The Syrian

sources said the timing of the article was "suspicious," as it coincided with (1) U.S. forces' failure to control escalating violence in Iraq; (2) the elevation of the Syrian-Iraqi relationship to the "strategic level" resulting from PM Utri's recent visit to Baghdad; and (3) the positive "atmosphere" of dialogue in the U.S.-Syrian relationship.

Comment

15. (S/NF) Despite their efforts to downplay their disappointment, many SARG officials and the Syrian "street" hoped the Obama Administration would at least ameliorate, if not entirely rescind, the executive order implementing U.S. economic sanctions as an early confidence-building measure in our policy of sustained engagement. Our contacts have also been seized by the lack of any official U.S. language suggesting the Administration might review sanctions at some time in the future. The SARG's public comments on U.S.-Syrian relations have encouraged a perception that bilateral ties are stronger than may actually be the case. The SARG's subdued reaction to E.O. 13338's renewal may be attributed to a fear of being seen as having been openly humiliated by the Obama Administration. The fact that Moubayed writes for an English-speaking audience suggests that they are also trying to limit any escalation of the sanctions rhetoric with us.

16. (S/NF) On foreign fighters, the SARG has predictably deployed two defensive postures. To the Syrian public, the SARG blames an Israeli conspiracy. To more sophisticated audiences, they blame the lack of U.S. or Iraqi intelligence sharing. As we increase pressure on this issue, Washington can anticipate the SARG to re-employ these disingenuous arguments.

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